



NEWS RELEASE

RELEASE 7 MARCH 2005 AT 00:01 GMT

## **GENDER EQUALITY PROGRESS HAS BEEN MIXED SINCE BEIJING, UNRISD REPORTS**

UNITED NATIONS — There is “much to celebrate” in progress toward gender equality, but also “much at risk”, a decade after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, a United Nations research institute reports today.

Despite notable gains in such areas as political participation, education and labour force participation, women continue to face limits on income, authority and power, according to *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, released by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Women’s role in public life has grown in what the report calls a “rising tide” since 1995. While women’s share in national assemblies has only gone from 9 per cent on average to almost 16 per cent, the figure is 30 per cent or more in 16 countries. More women hold office everywhere except Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where the figure plummeted after communist party quotas for women were dropped.

Women in public life have worked to make laws responsive to women’s reproductive health and rights, and to bar violence and discrimination against women. Internationally, prosecutions against wartime sexual assault as a crime against humanity mean those responsible for sexual violence are starting to be held accountable in their own countries and the world at large.

Numbers do not tell the whole story, though.

“Despite women’s greater prominence in political life, they have in many cases yet to translate their visibility into leadership positions and influence over the decision-making process: there are still many instances where they are simply used as an extension of male power structures”, according to the report.

- CONTINUED -

“The transition from a heightened presence of women in politics to actual advance for gender equality issues and women-friendly policies takes time, and will depend upon the effectiveness of women’s movements in holding governments to account, and on the capacity of public sector agencies to translate ambitious gender-equity policy agendas into effective implementation. This is a matter of good governance in women’s favour”, the report states.

Political liberalization has sometimes harmed feminist politics. This is the case in Eastern Europe, where feminism has been associated with a repressive state. In other countries, the report says, political liberalization has been only partial and disillusionment with states’ failure to deliver development or democracy seems to have helped make conservative ethnic and religious movements attractive to women.

“Some of these identity-based forms of mobilization assert the superiority of ‘traditional’ gender roles along with systems of patriarchal authority, particularly where ‘women’s liberation’ is seen as part of unwelcome modernization”, the report says.

Moves to decentralize authority to local entities as part of reform efforts have included encouragement of women’s participation, but sometimes there are more women in national than local politics, the report finds, because of resistance from local traditional patriarchal systems. The report says this resistance may mean that decentralization reinforces men’s power over social institutions governing marital relations, conflict resolution and property rights.

“Local government remains a key arena to watch over the next decade, as more and more women assert their leadership ambitions and challenge patriarchal systems at this level”, the report says, pointing to signs that women in local government are affecting local spending and building acceptance of women’s political authority.

Economically, free market and deregulation-oriented policies have not largely benefited women, the report says, citing severe financial crises, sluggish economic growth, lower government spending, increasing poverty and the erosion of government public services and social protection. Although women’s pay and conditions have sometimes been better in export industry jobs, many of those jobs are insecure and dead-end, the report says, and it is difficult to close the gap with men’s wages. During the 1997 East Asian crisis, the report says, women were often the first to lose their jobs. Moreover, constraints on public spending have particularly hurt women.

Women have increased their economic activity generally during the last 30 years—aside from post-Soviet Eastern and Central Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa—but labour markets continue to be stratified by gender. Even in OECD countries, men tend to work full-time while women work part-time and there are earnings gaps between male and female full-time workers. Care work—whether paid or unpaid—remains predominantly women’s work in both North and South, with debilitating consequences for women and girls in contexts where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is imposing a heavy care burden.

- CONTINUED -

---

Women are also working under deteriorating terms and conditions. International Labour Organization evidence shows that “informal employment”—lacking secure contracts, benefits or social protection—is half to three-quarters of developing country nonagricultural work and accounts for more work for women than men in developing countries outside of northern Africa. Rural livelihoods have become more insecure in contexts where cutbacks in state support to agriculture have coincided with increasing exposure to competition from large subsidized producers. Rural poverty continues to push women into cities, and many young women from the countryside are in small-scale domestic production, petty trading or elsewhere at the bottom of the informal employment ladder, and may work under conditions designed to avoid labour laws, such as exploitive piece-rate home work.

The report lauds the emergence of new forms of organizing among women in the informal economy during the 1990s, but says many of the new unions and women workers’ rights organizations face difficulties in becoming sustainable and having a policy impact.

In the area of war and conflict, women have been given more credibility in peacemaking and conflict resolution, the report says, and are “beginning to claim, and win, places at the peace table and in the negotiation of a ‘gender-friendly’ peace”.

At the same time, their roles in providing care and refuge and conducting humanitarian relief programmes “have been less widely noticed”.

Women ex-combatants still tend to be “relatively marginalized, if not completely neglected” in efforts to help ex-combatants after wars, the report says.

The report cites prosecutions of wartime violence against women by war crimes tribunals in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, but says most wartime sexual crimes against women still go unpunished and prosecutions “tend to be painfully slow”.

*Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World* draws on research by more than 60 feminist scholars from various countries and regions, particularly in the South. Some of those papers will be published as UNRISD Occasional Papers for Beijing +10.

UNRISD, an autonomous United Nations agency established in 1963, promotes research on pressing social issues of development. Multidisciplinary studies are carried out in collaboration with an extensive network of scholars and research institutes, mainly in developing countries.

**Media inquiries to:**

Caroline Danloy  
Phone: +41 (0)22 917 2316  
Fax: +41 (0)22 917 0650  
danloy@unrisd.org

Nicolas Bovay  
Phone: +41 (0)22 917 1143  
Fax: +41 (0)22 917 0650  
bovay@unrisd.org

**Launch events in New York:**

7 March 2005, Ford Foundation • 8 March 2005, United Nations Headquarters

-END-

---